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ABSTRACT

A feasibility study has been conducted in Australia to investigate school and teacher objectives and practices in the development of oracy, to determine oracy skills agreed to be important, and to assess the feasibility and desirability of testing competence in oracy. The need for oracy assessment arises from a need for schools to account for fundamental learning outcomes, from expressed teacher needs, and from the omission of oracy assessment from previous studies of the literacy of Australian students. The feasibility study involved group interviews with teachers to determine oracy objectives and practices, after which a framework was developed to classify listening and speaking tasks. The tasks were classified according to three dimensions: required abilities in the areas of oral vocabulary, understanding and use of literal and implied meanings, and analytical and critical thinking: the context of the oracy task: and the purpose in listening or speaking. A total of 22 listening and 22 speaking objectives were identified for assessment, and separate listening tests (based on answering questions about tape-recorded material) and speaking tests (based on individual interviews) were developed for students aged 10 to 14 years and administered to approximately 1,300 students. The results will be analyzed with respect to student performance, relation of oral language to listening and word knowledge performance, and relation of student background and nature of school program to performance. (GT)

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The Assessment of Oracy : Feasibility and Methods

Sid Bourke

Some Issues of Accountability

The progressive decentralization of school curricula throughout Australia is a relatively recent and continuing phenomenon. One of the reasons advanced has been the desirability of meeting students' needs through devolution of professional responsibility to schools and teachers. Another thrust behind decentralization has been the desire for meaningful input to schools from the local communities they serve (Matheson, 1976:4). In this way it is intended that the schools' programs will better reflect the different needs of their communities. The implied requirement for schools to be accountable to the community for the time students are compelled to spend in them and for the expenditure of public money has been argued elsewhere to be a reasonable demand flowing naturally from devolution of responsibility for curricula (Bourke, 1978; Australian College of Education, 1978:11-28). The requirement for schools to be accountable is not new. However the body to which schools are accountable is now less the Head Office of a State Department of Education and more the local community.

It has become clear from media coverage that sections of the general public do have an interest in the quality of education offered to students. For example, there is likely to be continued pressure on schools to ensure that all students can perform basic tasks adequately so that they are capable of progressing through the school system as far as they wish and are in a position to lead a normal life in Australian society after leaving school. It is considered that once the community is satisfied schools accept this responsibility, it is likely that the community will support the many other valuable school activities which, rightly or wrongly, many see as interesting for students but not as essential.

Whether oracy should be a component of essential learning for all students has been considered recently in the course of comprehensive studies by researchers commissioned by the Federal Government's Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training and by the Victorian Basic Curriculum Task Force. In both cases some listening and speaking abilities were seen by teachers as important or essential for students to develop while at school (Collins, Hughes and Fordham, 1978; Basic Curriculum Task Force, 1978). Collins et al

also sought the opinions of parents who rated listening and speaking abilities as important. As most communication, whether within or outside the school is oral rather than written, it would be difficult to dismiss oracy as an essential component of a school curriculum.

The Core Curriculum

School curricula provide for considerable diversity of student outcomes according to specific community, teacher and student desires and needs. There are, however, areas of school curricula where there exists considerable uniformity in content and skills taught. These areas are related to the knowledge and skills that all students should achieve while at school so they will be able to progress through the school system as independent learners, and so that they will be able to play a full and active role in the wider community on leaving school. It has been argued that this knowledge and these skills make up the core curriculum and should be clearly specified and placed at the centre of every school's program (Bourke and Morgan, 1977). The school curriculum would then consist of at least two segments: a common nucleus of essential knowledge and skills, and additional layers of related activities which would differ between schools and between classrooms. Smith and Orlosky (1975:89-90) refer to these two segments as fundamental learning and advanced learning. On this argument the fundamental learning which constituted the core curriculum would need to be carefully assessed.

The place of reading, writing and number as fundamental learning is clear. Similar arguments can be advanced in support of the inclusion of some aspects of oral language programs in a core curriculum. In supporting the inclusion of oracy, the question of assessing student performance and school programs becomes more pressing than might otherwise have been the case. Student assessments provide the type of information required for accountability in the core area of a school's curriculum.

Background to the Study of Oracy

In 1975 the House of Representatives Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties asked the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to undertake a study to assess the literacy of Australian students. In the course of early discussions of the range of content and abilities subsumed under 'literacy', the desirability of including oracy (speaking and listening) assessments was expressed. However the relative difficulty of assessing oracy, the time restrictions on the study and rival claims for the inclusion of reading, writing and number work combined to lead to the exclusion of oracy assessments at that time from the project that became known as the Australian Studies in School Performance.

The possibility of work in the oracy area did not end with the exclusion of oracy from the Australian Studies in School Performance. The Education Research and Development Committee (ERDC) commissioned Dr Diana Davis and Dr Milton Clark to review curriculum and other statements related to oracy development in Australian schools. Davis and Clark reported that curriculum statements, though generally acknowledging the importance of oracy skills, did not differentiate between providing 'fairly random opportunities for students to exercise oral skills and specifically designing spoken English activities to develop the skills of communication' (Davis and Clark, 1976:238). They went on to refer to what they saw as a failure to attempt a mapping of performances in listening and speaking as 'a major breakdown in education' (Davis and Clark, 1976:238a). Subsequently the ERDC asked the ACER to look into the feasibility of oracy assessments being made in a national study. The remainder of this paper is concerned with the results of the feasibility study, a description of the methodology adopted to decide on what should be assessed, and the development of instruments necessary for the subsequent assessment study currently being done. Completion date for the project is December 1979.

The Feasibility Study

The feasibility study set out to investigate the school and teacher objectives and practices in the development of oracy from Years 3 to 10, to determine what were the oracy skills generally agreed as important, and to assess the feasibility and desirability of testing competence in oracy.

It was originally intended to obtain teachers' views of the importance of oracy development and details of their objectives and practices in this area before attempting to develop a statement containing a framework for listing listening and speaking objectives. However, following initial discussions with teachers this approach was not followed. It seemed that, in general, teachers had given relatively little thought to framing an oracy program compared with the thought and effort they normally had put into their literacy program. This position was also found in most of the curriculum statements and guidelines available from Education Departments. In general, oracy received incidential rather than specific treatment (Davis and Clark, 1976:15-16). The approach adopted in this study was to prepare a statement of listening and speaking objectives from available information in curriculum guidelines and in the literature. The statement of objectives was then used as a stimulus when obtaining teachers' views of the importance or oracy in the school curriculum in a group interview setting.

Group interviews with teachers at the same school were used not only because they were less time-consuming than individual interviews, but because the teachers found it easier to talk in a group about the place of oracy in the curriculum, about their practices and of the importance of the area for students. The response of one teacher often stimulated supporting or conflicting responses from others.

Although most teachers seemed to have given little detailed thought to the development of listening and speaking abilities, many classroom programs and activities had oracy components built in. In general, teachers considered the development of listening and speaking abilities to be important. On balance, the majority considered oracy development to be important in itself, while almost half the teachers saw oracy largely as a means, basis or foundation of literacy to come. Teachers at primary schools were able to identify greater ranges of abilities and activities related to the development of oracy than were teachers at secondary schools.

Teachers were concerned about the assessment of oracy abilities and almost all pointed out and emphasized the difficulty of making assessments and, where they were made, of the subjectivity of their assessments. Most of the primary teachers and about one half of the secondary teachers would have liked some help in making assessments of students in this area. The remaining secondary teachers either felt that more formal and reliable assessment was not possible or not wanted in the oracy area. There was a related tendency for secondary teachers to think that the oracy abilities of students should have been developed, to a large extent, in the primary school and therefore were of lesser concern to them at the secondary level, at least as far as their teaching program was concerned.

The group interview method used was successful not only because of the reasons already expressed, but also because there was a considerable degree of consistency within a school on teachers' views and practices with respect to oracy development. In most cases a 'school view' did emerge.

Devising a Framework

The situation in which the listener or speaker finds himself will have a profound effect on his understanding and use of language. The subject being talked of will determine the choice of language as it will lead the speaker to choose certain words and structures rather than others. The different use of language in different situations, or register, involves the ability to

detect and apply changes in the appropriateness of the spoken language used in a particular situation. More generally, the physical situation and occasion on which the language is used, that is the context, has a most significant effect on the language employed.

An understanding of relationship involves the ability to detect and utilise the kinds of relationships existing between the speaker and his listener or his audience. Wilkinson and Stratta (1969:189) refer to the Addressor (speaker) as having certain qualities of mind and emotions which reveal themselves in his speech. He has a particular place in time and society, a particular psychological make-up and a particular purpose in speaking, and his language will give certain indications of these things. The Addressee (listener) has the same characteristics. His role is to receive, apparently passively, the language of the speaker, or to reciprocate by the use of nonverbal signs such as nods of agreement, bewildered looks or murmured assents, or to participate actively in an exchange of words. In general, the relationship between the speaker and listener will considerably affect the language used.

Effective listening and speaking also depend in part, upon a range of skills which students need to develop in order to lead a normal life both in and out of school. The importance of effective oral communication is undeniable and is unlikely to decrease. It has even been clearly argued that reading and writing will become obsolete skills being replaced by listening, speaking and visual skills as technology is increasingly applied to communication (Block, 1978). Given the complex interactions involved with oral communications, it would seem necessary to provide a framework for considering the ranges of listening and speaking skills which schools might assist in developing in their students. Within the framework a considerable number of specific tasks and competencies would be identified and made explicit as potential objectives in a school program concerned with the development of listening and speaking skills. It is considered that such a functional approach in terms of describing specific tasks which students should be able to perform would assist teachers and others concerned with the development of listening and speaking skills to make decisions about which objectives are important and which objectives it is possible for a school program to pursue.

The framework which has been developed to provide a meaningful classification of listening and speaking tasks is simply one of many approaches which could have been used. It is similar to the classification used by

Allen and Brown (1976) but differs somewhat from the classifications of listening proposed by Crink and Buntley (1955) and Duff and Clark (1976), and a classification of speaking used by Tough (1976).

The tasks identified may be classified according to three separate dimensions of:

1 the listening or speaking ability required,

2 the context of the listening or speaking task, and

3 the purpose in listening or speaking.

Each of the three dimensions may be used to classify the tasks and three separate categorizations of tasks are formed in this way. Alternatively, the three dimensions may be combined to form a framework in which each task is allocated to a cell in the three dimensional lattice so formed. The latter procedure is useful in determining which are the important areas and which areas may have been neglected in an oral language program.

A Description of the Framework

The dimension of ability is seen as the key one for the consideration of a program concerned with the development of oracy skills by students. Consequently in addition to a brief description of the ability dimension, some details are given of the categories of ability identified.

The Ability Dimension A range of listening and speaking abilities or skills at differing levels of language complexity are required for effective oral communication. Four categories of language have been identified as a means of grouping the abilities: oral vocabulary, literal meaning, implied meaning, and analytical and critical thinking. Obviously the categories overlap to some extent but, in general, both the listening and speaking skills can readily be placed in one of the four language categories.

1 Oral Vocabulary. The skills which are appropriate at this level are concerned with identifying and supplying words, statements and their meanings, to provide the basis for comprehension and use of oral language.

2 Literal Meaning. The skills required at this level are the comprehension and use of words and statements in different contexts where language is used for communicating information.

3 Implied Meaning. The skills required here are the abilities to comprehend and use words and statements where speech has the purposes of identifying and expressing intentions, feelings, attitudes and emotions, and where the literal meaning of language assumes lesser importance.

4 Analytical and Critical Thinking. The skills required here are the abilities to make and to express critical judgements concerning the logic, consistency, relevance and purpose of what is heard or spoken and the ability to participate logically, cogently and persuasively in discussions.

The Context Dimension The form of listening stimulus material and spoken expression will vary according to the context in which it is presented. For listening, the situation in which the stimulus is presented, the speaker, and his purpose in speaking are likely to be external to the listener although this will depend on the degree to which the purpose is shared between the speaker and the listener. For speaking, the situation, the audience and the purpose in speaking, while not external to the speaker, provide the context of the oral communication. They provide different contexts for the listener or speaker which considerably influence the specific requirement and difficulty of his task. In general, the context dimension may be seen as forming a continuum between formal and informal requirements. It is considered likely that performance in the formal communication contexts could be facilitated by specifically-directed school programs whereas performance in the informal contexts are unlikely to be influenced directly by curriculum or classroom practices. A formal/informal classification of contexts such as this is similar to the formal, semi-formal and intimate classification used by the Queensland Board of Secondary School Studies (1974:4 and 6).

The Purpose Dimension The usage of oral communication which a listener intends and the purpose a person has in speaking should be considered as important in a program concerned with the development of listening and speaking skills. Five categories of purpose in listening and speaking have been identified: these are personal, recreational, classroom, business and citizenship. The categories are similar to the four categories used by Hitchman (1966:8) to describe the need for verbal communication personally, socially, economically and nationally.

The Assessments Made

Large numbers of possible objectives were devised and rated by the teachers interviewed and by others particularly interested in oral language programs in schools. Finally 22 listening and 22 speaking objectives were selected as being very important for students and feasible to assess.

Separate tests were developed for students aged 10 and 14 years. However there was a large common component in the tests which was retained so that oral language development between the two ages could be assessed. Stratified random samples totalling approximately 1300 students were drawn from all Australian States and Territories at both age levels. Within States and Territories schools were selected with a probability proportional to size and then six students of the appropriate age were selected at random from within each school. Each student completed a listening test, a speaking test and a word knowledge test, and schools completed a school questionnaire and a short individual questionnaire for each student selected.

Listening Tests. The stimulus material, test items and test instructions were all provided on audio cassette with the supervising teacher asked to take responsibility for ensuring that all six students being group tested knew what to do. Multiple choice and a few completion items were used. Test lengths were 23 minutes and 29 minutes for 10- and 14-year-old students respectively. Although many listening tasks were tested, the tests concentrated upon students' abilities to comprehend literal meaning at several levles, instructions, implied meaning and conversations, to recall facts and to identify a speaker's probable intent and intended audience.

Speaking Tests. These tests were conducted in the form of an interview with each of the six students individually. The test administrator or interviewer (usually a teacher at the school) worked from a detailed schedule which included guidance on when and how to prompt students where necessary as well as the actual questions to be asked. The interview which lasted from 20 to 30 minutes in most cases was recorded on an audio cassette and returned to ACER for scoring. In the main, two types of scoring were used: adequacy of response was scored on a four-point scale referenced to specific criteria, and fluency of response was scored on a five-point normative scale. Other measures such as expressiveness were also used to a lesser extent. The major speaking tasks assessed included giving personal details, instructions and information, reading aloud, telling a story, using appropriate information, expressing critical judgements and organizing, developing and presenting ideas.

Analyses of Results. The proportions of students who were able to meet requirements on the tasks selected as important will be calculated and reported. In addition measures of type and complexity of language used in responding during the speaking tests will be used and related to listening and word knowledge performance. Information collected on the source and

nature of the schools' language programs, on school type, size and location, and on the background of individual students will also be related to student performance on the various listening and speaking tasks assessed.

Summary

The approach adopted for the assessment of oracy was a functional one concerned with the development of specific abilities by students. The abilities concerned were related to tasks which are considered to be important for students' language development at schools and for everyday life. The need for assessment of oracy arises from a need for the school to account for fundamental learning outcomes and from a desire expressed by teachers for assistance in assessing listening and speaking skills. It is argued that it is necessary to adopt an approach of this type if teachers are to be assisted in developing and assessing oral language for the benefit of individual students and for the evaluation of the effectiveness of their programs.

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